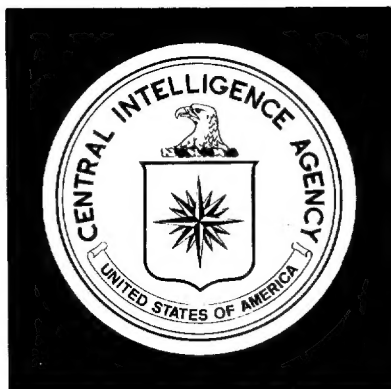


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The Split in the Vorster Cabinet: Its Meaning and Implications

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Note

In the past couple of months—and particularly since Vienna—members of the Vorster cabinet have aired in public what appear to be sharp differences over policy direction. The division is generally along traditional *verligte-verkrampste* lines. Interest in this particular debate is heightened by the fact that a group of cabinet ministers has publicly challenged the government in the most crucial area: domestic race policy. Moreover one conservative minister seems to have joined the challengers, while the Prime Minister, himself appears to be weighing in with the *verkrampste*.

None of the challengers proposes establishing majority rule or dismantling separate development. But the issue is critical: should there be movement and accommodation in the government's race policy, or should it try to hold the line? Indeed, there may be a more immediate issue at stake: future control of the National Party.

In this paper the issues and the advocates are briefly delineated, based on the information so far available; their meaning is assessed in terms of two alternate models of political behavior: a "prudence" model and a "tension" model; and tentative conclusions are drawn.

This study was written in the Center for Policy Support in CIA's Intelligence Directorate. It is intended primarily to stimulate further discussion and analysis of a question to which the answers are not yet known. Although it has had the benefit of comments and suggestions from OSI and ORPA, the hypothesis is the author's, and does not represent an Agency or DDI "position". Comments and queries may be addressed to

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The Split in the Vorster Cabinet: Its Meaning and Implications

Central Intelligence Agency
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Issues in contention

Since May, Vorster's cabinet has divided publicly on at least three issues: discriminatory laws (petty apartheid), future constitutional development, and laws against inter-racial sex. Those urging movement in these areas are the generally more progressive, or "*verligte*", ministers: Pik Botha (Foreign Affairs), Piet Koornhof (National Education, Sport, and Recreation), and Hendrik Schoeman (Agriculture). On at least one major issue P. W. Botha, Minister of Defense, has joined the *verligte*. The "*verkrampte*," who have taken a conservative, stand-pat position on all three issues are Andries Treurnicht, (Deputy Minister of Bantu Administration), Connie Mulder, (Minister of Information), and—on occasion—Vorster, himself.

The form of debate has been, for the most part, indirect. A *verligte* challenge has been followed by a *verkrampte* response, sometimes on the same day.

On Racial Discrimination

On 11 May, Foreign Minister Pik Botha won a landslide victory in a parliamentary by-election. According to the South African press, this sequence of public statements followed:

Botha (11 May): the victory is a mandate for the government to move away from racial discrimination [i.e., petty apartheid].

Mulder (11 May): the victory is a mandate only for Vorster to continue negotiating with the Western nations over problems of southern Africa.

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Treurnicht (12 May): future changes in policy will not include repeal of discriminatory laws, since maintaining separate political structures would be senseless if social separation were abandoned.

Thus even in the area of petty apartheid, where most South African whites are prepared to see considerable relaxation of the color bar,¹ the cabinet's leading *verkrampes* publicly repudiated a *verligte* member.

On Constitutional Change

A more fundamental issue is the question of future constitutional arrangements. A Cabinet Committee chaired by the Minister of Defence, P. W. Botha, has been examining the present constitution to assess how well it meets South Africa's needs, as seen by the ruling National Party (NP), and to recommend changes.

Although the Committee has not yet announced its findings, the intensity of the public debate over this issue in May and June suggests that tentative recommendations, at least, may already have been aired within the cabinet.

Both sides have emphasized that there are "no basic differences of opinion" on the subject within the Party; yet a careful reading of the *verligte* and *verkrampte* statements on future constitutional development has shown the two to be, in fact, quite far apart.²

The *verkrampte* view has been explained by Mulder, starting last fall when he proposed substituting the term "plural democracy" for "separate development." Acknowledging that he was looking for something that would gain international acceptance, Mulder spoke generally of relaxing discrimination somewhat, and minimizing rigidly enforced separation. Later he explained the meaning of plural democracy as "...the acceptance of the *current division of peoples* in a political system." (italics added) Vorster appears to support this general position. He has publicly rejected power sharing, and sees no political rights for blacks outside the homelands "in the foreseeable future."

In the *verligte* view, power sharing is precisely what South Africa should be striving toward. Koornhof, in a 24 May speech, which he himself

¹According to recent opinion polls.

²The Annex is a summary of the major statements on this subject by SAG officials.

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billed as "an important message," said that the government *is moving toward a system* not unlike that in Switzerland. White, Coloured, and Indian people would be drawn into a "*collective decision-making process*." (italics added) He raised two additional questions: the possibility that urban blacks might eventually be included in this system, and an enhanced future role for the Cabinet Council.³ A couple of days later P. W. Botha gave his support to the cantonal system—an idea he had first suggested last September. He added the heretical suggestion that there could even be a common South African nationhood.

During the next couple of weeks Mulder, Treurnicht, and Vorster all weighed in against Koornhof. In a BBC interview Vorster tried to reduce the Koornhof proposal to the idle talk of dreamers, not practical politicians. The strongest attack came in two speeches by Treurnicht, who rejected joint decision-making by Whites, Coloureds, and Indians, as well as the notion of a super-parliament to govern everyone. He indirectly rebuked Koornhof for the "dangerous" view that Whites, Coloureds, Asians, and urban blacks could form one plural political community.

Laws on Inter-Racial Sex

In early July *verligte* cabinet members challenged the party line in what is probably the most sensitive area of race policy: the prohibition of sex and marriage between whites and non-whites. The persistence of strong feelings on this subject among Afrikaners was demonstrated in a poll taken last fall, in which only 25 percent of the Afrikaners interviewed favored abolition of the Immorality Act, and less than 20 percent were in favor of scrapping the Mixed Marriages Act. Vorster, himself vigorously defended both Acts in a June TV interview.

Yet Hendrik Schoeman, Minister of Agriculture, told a National Party meeting in early July that the Immorality Act is not needed. He noted that South Africa "must be the only country in the world with such an act." He was supported by Pik Botha, who issued a statement a couple of days later reiterating Schoeman's point that "these laws are not needed for our [i.e., white] survival."

Schoeman's statement prompted an immediate rebuttal by Treurnicht, who stressed that the National Party was formally pledged to maintain both Acts. Schoeman, himself, under pressure to uphold Party unity, recanted

³ An advisory council to the Government consisting of white cabinet ministers and representatives of the Coloured and Indian communities.

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two days later by re-asserting his support for retaining the two laws. Botha has told Ambassador Bowdler that he, too, is under pressure to retract his statement of a few days ago. Treurnicht has delivered another stinging attack on individualism and liberalism, spelling out what he sees as the serious implications for Afrikaner identity if the two Acts were repealed.

The meaning of the split

In South Africa, as in the USSR, the really important policy decisions are reached after consultation among a very small circle of men, and without open discussion or broad sounding of public opinion. Although a number of NP parliamentarians are consulted as individuals, many MPs—particularly those in the opposition—learn of impending legislation only when it is formally tabled in parliament. This closed decision-making process is enhanced—indeed, is made possible—by the fact that South Africa's leaders come from a single and exclusive cultural background; have a common view of themselves and their country; represent a small and relatively homogeneous constituency; and share a common perception of “others”—i.e., the non-Afrikaner world.

As in the Soviet case, insiders are under severe constraints against “leaks” to outsiders, and seldom have an incentive to break the bond of silence. As a result, divisions within the leadership are difficult to detect, almost impossible to corroborate, and hazardous to interpret.

What can be said, then, about the differences which have recently surfaced among South African cabinet ministers? Are they real? Are they what they appear to be, or do they reflect divisions over even more fundamental issues?

First, while cabinet ministers have in the past expressed divergent views on a particular issue (e.g., sports policy), it is unusual to see them in such a flurry of conflicting statements, and arguing with such intensity, on major policy questions. Second, the airing of differences must be seen as political behavior—i.e., it is neither idle nor spontaneous talk, and need not reflect personal convictions, but is undertaken with the persuasion of a particular audience in mind. The question is, what audience, and to what (apparently opposing) ends?

Available factual evidence, alone, cannot carry the analysis any further. To provide a more useful perspective for assessing the data at hand, a brief look at two separate models of South African political behavior follows.

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The *prudence model* starts from an assumption of Afrikaner exclusivism: the common cultural background, perceptions, and sense of belonging shared by South Africa's leaders give them an unusual cohesion and unity. In a culture which places great value on conservatism, conformity, and loyalty to the group, those who rise to the top are likely to show an abundance of these virtues. Conversely, mavericks, loners, and defenders of unpopular causes are not likely to become leaders in that society.

Hence the prudence model perceives South Africa's leaders as men who will go to great lengths to preserve the harmony and unity of the group, and who tend to place their common goal—the survival and well-being of the Afrikaner people—above personal ambition and petty politics.

Seen from this perspective, the recent series of apparently conflicting policy statements by Vorster's ministers lacks political drama. If this model prevails, then such statements are only an airing of various views on matters where decisions have yet to be made. It is a way to stimulate broad, grass-roots discussion of issues coming before provincial NP caucuses. A case could even be made that these apparent "differences" are being purposely exaggerated in order to lull the outside world into believing that significant movement and change are imminent.

It is the argument of this paper, however, that the prudence model is inadequate in explaining how South Africa's leadership would act under extreme pressure. When things are going well for the Afrikaner *volk*, it is easy for the leadership to remain unified, and for individuals to submit to the leader's will or to submerge their own views in the group consensus. But what happens to this unified, happy family when things go wrong? In the prudence model, how do the actors respond to failure? To disaster? How do they apportion blame? And what if they lose confidence in the leader?

In this situation a *tension model* seems to offer a better guide to understanding the Vorster cabinet's behavior. The tension model acknowledges all the peculiarities of the Afrikaner culture, as well as its impact on South Africa's leaders. But it also recognizes these men as political animals, each with an ego, ambitions, a sense of personal destiny, and confidence in his own powers (no matter whence derived).

It is suggested here that serious or prolonged crisis will tend to diminish the unity and cohesion of the leadership, and can lead individual leaders to

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assert themselves. Such self-assertion would, of course, be rationalized as being in the best interests of the Afrikaner people.

For the tension model to be operative, South Africa's leaders must perceive that the nation is in a serious crisis. There are more than enough "objective" indicators that it is:

- In 1976 South Africa had its most serious racial disturbances of this century.
- South Africa's abortive invasion of Angola has had adverse political repercussions, at home and abroad.
- The rapid economic growth of the 1960s has given way to a three-year recession. Black unemployment is large and growing, and foreign investment (which has been critical to South African growth) has diminished drastically.
- The end of Portuguese colonial rule, and the apparently imminent collapse of white rule in Rhodesia, face South Africa with black-ruled and potentially hostile neighbors along all its borders.
- In the first four months of 1977, nearly 8,600 people emigrated from South Africa: the highest outflow since records started in 1924. Moreover, preliminary records suggest that the largest single group of emigres was professional people.

There is little doubt that South Africa's leaders recognize that the country is facing multiple crises. Vorster's New Year's Day message to his people warned of sacrifices ahead as South Africa stands alone in an increasingly threatening environment. In addition:

- South Africa's leaders express deep concern over its growing isolation from the West.
- Defense outlays were increased by 30 percent in 1975/76, and over 20 percent in 1977/78.
- A White Paper on Defence in April noted that the security threat to South Africa "has increased in tempo, and is closer in time;"

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- Recent legislation on internal security is aimed at strengthening the authority of the police and at allowing the Defence Force to be used against internal disorders.

In a parliamentary address in April, Mulder compared South Africa to a ship at sea which is threatened from all sides. "The real threat is that the seamen on the ship begin a mutiny. Therefore you will have to talk with your own people, the wages of the seamen will have to be adjusted, and there will have to be mutual discussion as to who is in charge of things."

If the country is perceived as being in a crisis, in what ways is the leadership's behavior consistent with the tension model?

First, individual leaders are proposing significant shifts away from established policy. The Schoeman-Pik Botha suggestion that the Immorality Act be abolished is a clear departure from the established policy line. So, too, is Koornhof's original call for a "collective decision-making process" involving Whites, Coloureds, and Indians, with the possibility of later inclusion of urban blacks. That this was indeed what Koornhof had in mind is confirmed by a recent conversation between Pik Botha and Ambassador Bowdler.

Second, verligte cabinet ministers and other NP officials have broken party discipline by going public with their proposals. The pressure on Schoeman and Pik Botha to recant belies the notion that these men had Vorster's blessing to float their deviant views as trial balloons. Moreover the risk of incurring party sanctions for breach of discipline seems high.⁴

Third, both the verligte and verkrampte sides have publicly endorsed or backed the positions taken by spokesmen for their point of view. Treurnicht seconded Mulder in rebuking Pik Botha. P. W. Botha, departing from his traditionally conservative stance, endorsed Koornhof on constitutional change, while Treurnicht, Mulder, and Vorster attacked Koornhof's position. Pik Botha supported Schoeman's statement on the Immorality Act.

Such endorsements suggest that these positions represent the views of two opposing groups, not merely those of individual ministers speaking for

⁴In April, Piet Marais, an outspoken verligte MP, told parliament that the Bantustan policy "simply would not work," and that Coloureds and Asians should enjoy the same rights as Whites. He was immediately rebuked by the Party whip for speaking out on such issues outside the Party caucus. A month later, when asked to comment on the Koornhof proposal, Marais said, "I do not want to comment, because I believe in party discipline"—suggesting that he may have been severely chastened for his earlier remarks.

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themselves. In short, cabinet ministers have gone beyond breaking party discipline: they have given signals in public that the cabinet is divided and that the sides have formed on what, to white South Africans, are important issues in domestic race policy.

Its Implications

If the tension model is assumed to apply, then the current split in the cabinet must be viewed as a serious and conscious challenge to Vorster's leadership. The recent public proposals by *verligte* ministers in the area of race policy go beyond a departure from established policy and a breach of party discipline: they are a bold appeal, over Vorster's head, to the Party and the electorate. Yet the appeal can only be to those whites—until now thought to be a small minority—who are prepared to see significant movement (in terms of South African white perceptions) in South Africa's handling of its race problem.

Why would men like Pik Botha, Piet Koornhof, P. W. Botha, and Hendrik Schoeman take such a political gamble? This is particularly relevant in the case of Koornhof and Pik Botha, neither of whom is believed to have a solid political base of his own. The most plausible explanation is that they believe that Vorster has failed to respond to the internal and external crisis which they now see threatening South Africa; that they see him as a political prisoner of the *verkrampste*, a leader committed to resisting significant change in long-entrenched policy at a time when change is urgently needed.⁵ It also seems likely that they would have undertaken such a challenge only if assured of strong support from important groups of white South Africans.

The timing of the *verligte* challenge—a month or so before the opening of provincial NP congresses—suggests that it was launched in time to allow local Party officials to take grass roots soundings among their constituents before taking up these issues in the Party. Perhaps this is the opening gambit of a *verligte* bid to wrest control of the Party from Vorster and the *verkrampste*.

In a larger sense, we may be seeing the beginning of a serious erosion of Afrikaner unity. This prospect was foreseen more than a year ago by

⁵In a recent speech to a large trades union gathering, Vorster said "The world demands of us certain things and certain actions to which we cannot agree, *no matter what happens in the future. Certain people are prepared to submit to those demands. As far as I am concerned, I am not prepared to do it.*" (italics added)

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Heribert Adam, a leading authority on Afrikaner politics.⁶ Arguing that South African whites now lack a motivating ideology, and that apartheid is no more than "a tactical device invented in response to pressure," Adam noted that, in such circumstances,

...there is no correct line to guarantee the survival of White privileges for Afrikaners. Politics has become more of an ad hoc maneuvering, with few taboos and guiding threads except the preservation of the group position as the sole goal.

As a result, group cohesion will suffer, says Adam, and splits over tactics will occur. Adam predicted that, in the future, South African whites will have to react much more to the pressure of events than on the basis of forward planning and a controlled system of racial domination.

For US policy the implications are several.

First, South Africa's rulers should be seen as an increasingly differentiated group, and not as a monolith. Since the US relationship is a critical one in South African eyes, this should offer future opportunities for quiet and possibly fruitful contacts between the United States and those South African leaders who are trying to bring about significant change. The latter face a long and difficult struggle, which will be made somewhat easier if they receive signs of understanding and encouragement from outside.

Second, signs of disagreement and divisions among the ruling elite should be taken seriously—despite protestations of Mulder and others that all is placid and harmonious. Careful weighing and analysis of such signals should provide useful insights into issues of contention and possible policy shifts, and might well offer sudden opportunities for US policy initiatives.

Third, a growing split on race policy would bring back into political participation those various groups of whites who seek meaningful change, but who had given up hope of finding support from their leaders. If they perceive that there are serious advocates of change within the NP leadership, this could open up new lines of dialogue between the government and the public, and could lead to significant political realignments.

⁶ In *Social Dynamics*, University of Capetown. No. 2 1976. His is by no means a universally shared view among academicians, however.

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Full participation by non-whites in the political process remains a long way off, at best. But if one takes a longer run perspective—say 20 years, which in light of the US civil rights campaign seems not unduly long for profound social change to be brought about—then recent developments are encouraging. Serious proposals to end petty apartheid, to bring Coloureds and Asians into some sort of joint decision-making process, to abolish laws against inter-racial sex—such moves, when they come, will have consequences for South African race relations that go far beyond the intrinsic value of the measures themselves.

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ANNEX

Summary of NP Officials' Statements on Constitutional Change

- 15 Sep 1976: *Mulder*: coins term "plural democracy" in place of separate development or apartheid. Would abviate color discrimination, minimize rigidly enforced separation, safeguard ethnic identification of each group, and design a policy that will win international acceptance.
- 11 Mar 1977: *Vorster*: has "great expectations of expanded powers for the Joint Cabinet Council," but rejects a U.P. proposal for a multi-racial, Turnhalle-type conference. "This side of the house will never support power sharing."
- 24 May 1977: *Koornhof*: The Government is moving toward a system not unlike that in Switzerland. White, Coloured, and Indian people would be drawn into a "collective decision-making process" operating on a consensus basis. "There is a school of thought which believes" the urban blacks should in time be drawn into the new dispensation. "Only time will tell whether this line of thought is feasible or not." Says his speech is "an important message." "The question arises whether the new Cabinet Council...could not be viewed as the beginning of a process of institutional evolution which will culminate in a sophisticated parliamentary system specially tailored to the needs of South Africa's multi-ethnic population structure."
- 27 May 1977: *P. W. Botha*: a canton-type system should guarantee the biggest measure of self-rule for each race group over its own affairs. Afrikanerism and South Africanism need not be in conflict...there is a real desire for a common South African nationhood.
- 30 May 1977: *Vorster* (On BBC interview): Koornhof "put forward certain possibilities of what people could discuss and what they could think about." But Koornhof did not say that separate development should be scrapped..."he made a sort of future projection, without saying in the least—because I did not read it that way—that the urban black [should be divorced from his

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people—i.e., homeland]. Q: (On rights for urban blacks outside the homelands.) "I for one do not foresee it in the foreseeable future. It is something people can talk about, ...will talk about...but it is certainly not practical politics at this stage whatsoever."

- 31 May 1977: *Mulder* in plural democracy there is no question of a master body with division of power—in contrast with the canton system and cultural pluralism. *Plural democracy means the acceptance of the current division of peoples in a political system.* Has serious objections to the Swiss canton system; especially its weak central power.
- 31 May 1977: *Mulder and Koornhof* stress there are "no basic differences of opinion" within the NP; *Koornhof*: "We stand together and behind our Prime Minister."
- 7 June 1977 *Treurnicht* (at NP local meeting): accepting the canton system means accepting a form of federalism, and this is excluded by NP policy. "We do not want one parliament that will govern everyone. South Africa is not a plural society, but a plurality of societies."
- 16 June 1977: *Treurnicht* (to SABRA meeting): Rejects joint decision-making by Whites, Coloureds, and Indians; rejects a super-parliament; pressures are being exerted from all sides; said it was necessary to talk about change "with discretion"; it is dangerous to view Whites, Coloureds, Asians, and Blacks outside the homelands as one plural political community.

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